

Pacific Standard

HOME > ENVIRONMENT



A WAKE UP CALL FOR THE WOLF KILLERS

JIMMY TOBIAS · UPDATED: JUN 14, 2017 · ORIGINAL: MAR 25, 2016

Wildlife Services, an infamous federal agency that kills tens of thousands of native predators a year, is reviled by conservationists around the country. Is reform looming?

In early February, a small group of federal agents grabbed their rifles, hopped in helicopters, and descended upon the Nez Perce–Clearwater National Forest in northeastern Idaho. They were there for the annual wolf slaughter. With choppers hovering and guns primed, the team scoured a remote wilderness landscape near the Montana border, tracking packs of wild carnivores as if they were fugitives on the run. State and federal authorities kept the mission's details secret while it was underway, fearing that it could spark protests. When news of the operation eventually reached the public, 20 wolves were dead.

The story isn't unique. This is the fifth year that Wildlife Services, a controversial federal agency, that annually kills tens of thousands of native predators across the country, has sent its specialists to annihilate wolf packs in northern Idaho. The goal of these "predator control" operations, as wildlife managers euphemistically call them, is to boost local elk populations, which have declined in recent decades. Some hunters and state officials blame that decline on regional wolf re-introduction, so they've asked the feds to handle the problem. At least 60 wolves have been exterminated as a result.

THIS WAR ON WILDLIFE, AS SOME CALL IT, IS THE OBJECT OF MOUNTING CRITICISM. IN RECENT YEARS, WHISTLEBLOWERS AND ACTIVISTS HAVE CHARGED WILDLIFE SERVICES WITH LAW BREAKING, WASTEFUL SPENDING, AND ANIMAL CRUELTY.

Idaho, through its wolf control board, financed the recent killing, and Wildlife Services, a sub-agency of the Department of Agriculture, carried it out. In an emailed statement, a spokesperson for the federal agency said the operation was conducted "in compliance with State wolf management plans, the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act."

Conservationists, however, say the slaughter is further evidence that Wildlife Services is out of control. "It was outrageous," says Brooks Fahy, the director of Predator Defense and a long-time agency critic. "And it was done in secret." Suzanne Stone, a staffer at Defenders of Wildlife, adds that the wolf kill was "far outside the bounds of the agency's mission."

On its website, Wildlife Services says it strives "to provide Federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts to allow people and wildlife to coexist." For decades, however, it has endeavored to *end* the existence of many thousands of individual animals across the country, especially in the American West. This war on wildlife, as some call it, is the object of mounting criticism. In recent years, whistleblowers and activists have charged Wildlife Services with law breaking, wasteful spending, and animal cruelty. Journalists have published searing reports on its conduct and questioned its purpose and efficacy. In Congress, Representative Peter DeFazio (D-Oregon) and a handful of allies have led an effort to investigate and re-structure the agency. Wildlife Services, with strong allies in Congress who shield it from legislative meddling, has traditionally been impervious to change, but is reform finally coming?

Wildlife Services has had multiple makeovers over the years. It began in the 1930s as the Division of Predator and Rodent Control, an agency that poisoned and shot wild creatures at the behest of ranchers and farmers. Today, the organization has a different name and a variety of responsibilities—it works at airports to kill birds that might collide with airplanes, it develops non-lethal animal management methods, and it eradicates invasive species, especially the ubiquitous European starling. Above all else, however, it is still the federal agency that kills native predators. According to a recent investigation in *High Country News*, the agency eliminated 580 black bears, 322 wolves, 796 bobcats, 305 cougars, and a whopping 61,702 coyotes across the country in 2014 alone. Predator control is a brutal kind of killing, featuring leg traps and poison, bullets and bait. It is relentless.

As in the 1930s, today's ever-growing pile of predator carcasses primarily benefits ranchers, hunters, and state wildlife agencies. These interests view coyotes, wolves, and cougars as a threat to their livestock, their big game, or their business models. They call in Wildlife Services to eradicate the threat. The agency's work, in this sense, is a massive public subsidy for private gain. *High Country News* reported that the agency took in \$85 million in federal appropriations and another \$80 million from state, local, and private contracts in 2013. But no one knows precisely how many federal dollars directly finance work on behalf of private interests.

"It is an incredibly opaque agency," says DeFazio, who has been working to reform Wildlife Services for decades. "I have tried to get an accounting for how they are spending the money and the methods they are using, but it is a very decentralized agency ... and so there is no place to get a handle on the depth and breadth of what they are doing."

Wildlife Services has recently taken a drubbing in the press. Earlier this month, *Harper's* published [an investigation](#) alleging that the agency has tested lethal poisons on dogs, killed endangered species, and broken federal law. Among other things, the article described Wildlife Services' illegal use and distribution of Compound 1080—a poison that was banned by the Environmental Protection Agency in the 1970s. This article followed a January feature in *High Country News* that questioned the agency's continued emphasis on predator extermination despite the availability of non-lethal wildlife management tools like portable electrical fencing and motion-activated alarms. Another [earlier investigation](#) in the *Sacramento Bee* reported that Wildlife Services killed 1,100 dogs and at least 12 federally protected eagles between 2000 and 2012. It also revealed that, since 1979, at least 10 people have died in crashes during the agency's aerial gunning operations.

Conservation groups have been eager to point out Wildlife Services' misconduct too. In a [film exposé](#), for instance, Predator Defense introduced the public to a cast of whistleblowers and former employees outraged at the agency's lack of accountability and oversight. One man describes Wildlife Services' "vast array of illegal activities." Another details the retaliation he suffered after speaking to his supervisor about agency wrongdoing. Together, these investigations paint a grim picture of what DeFazio has called a "rogue agency."

On top of all of these individual charges, the agency's work is not particularly effective: Despite decades of predator control, the number of coyotes in the American West, according to *Harper's*, remains steady.

The agency, for its part, denies many of the claims in the *Harper's* article and similar reports, calling them "biased." "These stories do not accurately represent the goals and missions of Wildlife Services or the wildlife professionals that work here," Pam Boehland, a spokesperson, wrote in an email. She added that the agency is staffed by "professional wildlife biologists who adhere to the public trust doctrine and love and respect our Nation's wildlife and animals."

Nevertheless, amid rising backlash, Wildlife Services seems ready for fundamental rethinking. Reform proposals are plentiful. Animal rights groups, for instance, plan to introduce language into this year's Congressional appropriations process that would require the agency to detail how and where it is spending money on predator control. Led by the Animal Welfare Institute, this reform effort will give concerned citizens the ability to evaluate the scope and efficacy of the agency's activities, according to Joanna Grossman, AWI federal policy advisor.

Conservationists are also using the courts to hold the agency accountable. Last spring, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and other organizations filed a lawsuit in California that resulted in [the suspension](#), pending environmental review, of a Wildlife Services contract in Mendocino County. The agency's critics see such lawsuits as a way to challenge its lethal methods on a county-by-county, state-by-state basis.

People like Brooks Fahy at Predator Defense, meanwhile, are calling for the abolition of Wildlife Services altogether, arguing that the agency's culture of killing is too deeply entrenched to change in a piecemeal manner. "We feel like the beneficial aspects of their program, like their airport work, can easily be taken over by other agencies," he says. "It is an agency whose time has passed. It is time to say goodnight to Wildlife Services."

Despite the investigations and public concern, the agency's critics still face a long uphill slog. Wildlife Services, after all, has powerful allies, most notably, as Harper's reported, the American Farm Bureau, which helped sink one of DeFazio's earlier reform efforts. DeFazio, for his part, thinks the political climate on Capitol Hill will have to change before any radical re-structuring takes place.

"Congress would have to wake up and decide that this is cruel, ineffective, and a waste of money," DeFazio says, "but right now I have very low hope for that."

Lead Photo: (Photo: lizzybaxter/Flickr)